

Mere weeks after enrolling its first cohort participants, the Healthcare Equity and Leadership Institute (HELI) in the School of Health Related Professions at the University of Mississippi Medical Center already is returning dividends.

The five students who make up the initial class – three from the Jackson campus of Hinds Community College, one from HCC's Raymond campus and one from Meridian Community College – applied for the program with the expressed interest of pursuing a higher health-related professions degree.

After an initial symposium in January and regular monthly leadership-training meetings that have exposed them to SHRP's faculty, students and curriculum, the HELI participants readily admit that the program has strengthened their desire to become key contributors in their chosen health-care fields.

"It has given me the background of what I want to do and the expectations of what I need to do, as far as grades and requirements, to join a program (in SHRP)," said Andre Funches, Jr., a first-year biology-pre-dental major at Meridian Community College. "We've been able to ask the students at UMMC about different things – what they are going through, their studies, what classes to take and what to focus on – and it clears up what's available to us.

"It actually encourages me to keep doing what I want to do in the dental field. It makes me want to work even harder."

Funches' remarks are encouraging in themselves to Dr. Juanyce Taylor, chair of health sciences in SHRP who secured the \$150,000, three-year grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to boost diversity among UMMC's male students. Of SHRP's more than 730 students, only approximately 5 percent are African-American, Hispanic or Native-American males.

"It's a true commitment when a student comes from an outside area, such as Meridian Community College, to take the time to participate in monthly leadership sessions," Taylor said. "This program facilitates a better relationship between the School of Health Related Professions and the community colleges throughout the state, and I believe it makes those students outside the metro-Jackson area feel more connected to the institution."

Joseph Robinson, a HELI participant from New Orleans about to graduate from the HCC Jackson campus, is another example, albeit in another discipline. Robinson said he initially became interested in nursing as a profession while working in a New Orleans hospital.

"I found myself more interested in the patients than in the job I was doing at that time," he said.

HELI has strengthened his desire to obtain a degree in nursing from UMMC, Robinson said.

"It has given me the initiative that I can do more, and it has helped me connect with people that can help me go further in the nursing program," he said. "It's given me insight into the steps I need to take to become a student here and insight into how to make it as a student here."

"I think it's very special that someone like Joseph is very eager and interested in receiving a nursing degree at UMMC," Taylor said. "This is his first choice – his dedication is indicated by his participation in the Healthcare Equity and Leadership Institute and his seeking guidance to apply to UMMC's nursing program."

Whether HELI serves as a pipeline for community college students into the School of Health Related Professions or into other schools at UMMC, such as the School of Nursing, the aim remains the same – to expand the horizons of minority male students, according to Taylor.

"For any entering college student, they need to see other professions and not be limited to their career outlook," she said. "The students currently participating in HELI have seen and heard about programs they've never experienced before."

Once the first class has completed its training, the idea is for those HELI participants to serve as "peer mentors" for succeeding HELI cohorts – and to expand participation into all community colleges throughout the state.

"With 15 community colleges in Mississippi, I would hope we could get representation from a majority of those as we move forward with the program," Taylor said.

It's a notion that meets with approval from the current participants.

"I definitely would recommend this program to other students at community colleges because it's very educational and informative and gives great guidance as to making a decision about what health-care field you want to be in," Robinson said.

"This program shows it takes hard work and dedication," Funches added, "but anything you want to do, you can do it, as long as you work hard and focus in, you can achieve."

For more information or to apply to participate in the Health Care Equity and Leadership Institute, call the Department of Health Sciences in the School of Health Related Professions at (601) 984-6315 or email Taylor at [jdaylor@umc.edu](mailto:jdaylor@umc.edu).